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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANJUL 000588

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KMCA](#) [KDEM](#) [GA](#)
SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA: PRESIDENT JAMMEH WINS RE-ELECTION IN
LANDSLIDE

REF: BANJUL 586 AND PREVIOUS

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH STAFFORD, REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

SUMMARY

11. (C) As expected, Gambian President Yahya Jammeh has won re-election in the September 22 contest, receiving over 65 percent of the vote, according to virtually complete results announced as of September 23 afternoon by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). Embassy observation teams dispatched throughout the tiny country witnessed a generally peaceful and orderly voting process, although under-age persons were seen casting ballots at several polling sites. Election day was preceded by a several-week campaign period in which the playing field was considerably skewed in Jammeh's and his APRC party's favor. Our initial assessment is that The Gambia's 2006 presidential election fell short of achieving its potential as a milestone in the country's democratic process, but was more than a strictly ritualistic exercise, as the Gambian voter was free to cast a secret ballot in the opposition's favor. END SUMMARY.

JAMMEH'S LANDSIDE VICTORY

12. (U) As expected, President Jammeh (ruling APRC party) was elected to a third five-year term September 22, handily defeating his two challengers, Ousainou Darboe, head of the country's largest opposition party, the United Democratic Party in alliance with two smaller parties, and Halifa Sallah, head of the National Alliance for Democracy and Development (NADD), a coalition of four minor parties. According to virtually complete results announced the afternoon of September 23 by the IEC, Jammeh received over 65 percent of the upwards of 400,000 votes cast nationwide, while Darboe's tally was around 25 percent, and Sallah finished third with about 10 percent. Neither Darboe nor Sallah has conceded defeat as yet, but they are expected to do so shortly.

A PEACEFUL, ORDERLY ELECTION DAY

13. (U) The Embassy fielded four teams to observe the polling in various areas of the tiny country; we visited perhaps a total of 100 or so voting sites. Our teams found the voting process to be peaceful and orderly, witnessing no incidents of violence; nor have we picked up any reports of untoward incidents from other domestic and international observer groups. By and large, polling officials at the

sites visited were knowledgeable of their duties and respected the voters' right to cast ballots in secret. These officials were also cooperative with us, e.g., freely responding to our questions and permitting us to view the "ballot boxes" (i.e. metal drums into which each voter dropped a marble that served as the ballot.) Similarly cooperative were the political parties' representatives at the sites, with the opposition as well as APRC reps expressing satisfaction with the voting process. We witnessed no incidents of intimidation or harassment by either security officials or ruling party supporters; no pro-APRC (or pro-opposition) posters or other promotional items were in evidence, and none of the voters wore the "APRC" baseball caps, shirts, or other items that had been evident during the campaigning.

IRREGULARITIES

¶4. (C) But irregularities in the voting process were noted. At various sites in central and western Gambia, we observed voting by children clearly under the legal voting age of 18; at one site, the number of such under-age voters was estimated at upwards of 100. There were also doubtless instances of non-Gambians voting -- e.g., Senegalese of Jammeh's Jolla tribe from the Casamance region -- although we ourselves were unable to verify cases during our observation. (COMMENT: Per reftel, during the campaign, the opposition accused the APRC of arranging for the registration of unqualified voters, i.e. under-age and non-Gambian persons. We believe that the opposition's accusation had merit, but the actual number of unqualified persons registered is unknown. END COMMENT)

SLANTED PLAYING FIELD

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¶5. (C) Apart from the foregoing irregularities -- which presumably boosted Jammeh's victory margin by an unknown margin -- the voting process on election day appeared credible. But, as previously reported (reftel), it was preceded by several weeks of campaigning in which the playing field was skewed considerably in Jammeh's favor. He took full advantage of his incumbent status, whether using official funds in dispensing largesse to farmers or having provincial governors and other supposedly neutral bureaucrats campaign on his behalf. While the opposition was given access to the official media in its electioneering activities, Jammeh and his campaign received more extensive and favorable treatment. The volatile, rough-hewn Jammeh's penchant for rhetorical excess was also on display on the stump, as he threatened to withhold development aid from areas not voting for him.

COMMENT: OUR INITIAL TAKE

¶6. (C) Jammeh's landslide victory comes as no surprise. The opposition's fragmentation in past months -- in particular, UDP head Darboe's breaking away from NADD -- ensured Jammeh's triumph, while the slanted playing field in his during the campaigning was likely the key factor in the margin of that triumph. It is noteworthy, in this regard, that he won the last presidential contest, in 2001, with only 52 percent of the vote. Our initial judgment is that The Gambia's 2006 presidential election fell short of achieving its potential as a milestone in the country's democratic process, although the voting was more than just a ritualistic exercise on Jammeh's behalf. At the end of the day, the Gambian voter was allowed to cast a vote -- in secrecy -- for an opposition candidate. END COMMENT

¶7. (U) We will submit a more extensive post-mortem on the election via septel, following our planned discussions with

other observer groups.

STAFFORD